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Capability, Objectivity and 'False Consciousness': On Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill

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Abstract

The extent to which Amartya Sen’s capability approach is prefigured in Karl Marx’s views comes into sharper focus when one notes that Marx and Friedrich Engels explicitly argued that the transformation from capitalism to communism would involve the development of ‘a totality of capacities’. Sen also cites the notion of ‘false consciousness’ in developing his view of objectivity and claims a Marxian pedigree for the notion of ‘objective illusion’. He suggests that public discussion can make evaluative judgements better informed and less parochial, so that they connect more closely with what people have reason to value. I argue that this line of argument is also closely related to views John Stuart Mill advanced in his discussion of the ‘competent judges’ and in his defence of liberty of thought and discussion.

0. Introduction

There are several citations from Karl Marx’s works scattered across Amartya Sen’s writings. In this paper I am chiefly concerned with citations of Marx’s work in the contexts of Sen’s work on capability and ‘development’ understood as ‘capability expansion’ as opposed to an expansion of income or wealth or of ‘utility’ as it is sometimes defined, and on objectivity, where Sen cites the notion of ‘false consciousness’ in his discussion of ‘objective illusion’. The relevant citations from Marx in the context of the capability approach are usually from Marx’s earlier writings, some of which were co-authored with Friedrich Engels. While these citations are well-known and recognised, reading Marx and Engels’ texts more closely suggests a deeper relationship between some of Sen’s views and Marx’s writings than has been recognised, no doubt in part because of a relative lack of interest in Marx’s work amongst some of Sen’s readers. In particular, some of Sen’s criticisms of certain forms of utilitarianism are clearly connected to Marx’s work and the notion of ‘false consciousness’,

though I suggest that Marx and Sen invoke this notion in different ways in their criticisms of utilitarianism. I argue that even if there is a significant connection between Marx's and Sen's criticisms of utilitarianism – since they both implicitly invoke the notion of 'false consciousness' - the position that Sen defends in his most recent works, which echoes some of Marx's texts, in fact also has a close affinity with some views within the utilitarian tradition which are found in John Stuart Mill's works and is not as far from that tradition as one might initially think from a casual reading of Sen's works.

I should mention at the outset that Sen has openly and explicitly acknowledged the influence of Marx, alongside others, on his work. In a symposium on his and J.S. Mill's works Sen writes that he takes 'much pride ... in the fact that my ideas are not "rootless" – they are in a "tradition" established by some very great people' (Sen, 2006, p. 81), Sen goes on to list some of his 'intellectual instigators' – and for the relevant symposium he lists: Aristotle, Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and Kenneth Arrow. In listing these intellectual debts, Sen notes something important that each thinker has taught him, and in Marx's case he acknowledges his debt to him: 'notably for teaching us that the most terrible inequalities may be hidden behind an illusion of normality and justice' (Sen, 2006a, p. 81). This specific point relates to the themes of 'false consciousness' and 'objective illusion' which I take up in section 2. I start in section 1, with Sen's work on capability and development. Section 3 connects Sen's views on 'objectivity' with J.S. Mill's discussions; and section 4 concludes.

Before discussing the various passages from the works of Sen, Marx and J.S. Mill, I should add that my aim here is not to provide a close historical reading of the works of Marx and Mill, but only to make a start by exploring specific claims Sen makes which are prefigured in the works of Marx and Mill. Furthermore, even if Sen himself explicitly acknowledges the influence of Marx as one of his 'intellectual instigators' and claims a

pedigree for some of his ideas in Marx’s views, I do not wish to make any strong claim about the explicit influence of either Marx or Mill – beyond any debt Sen himself acknowledges - on the development of Sen’s own ideas.

1. Development as Capability Expansion.

In advancing the capability approach Sen cites a passage from Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology* (written in 1845-46; see Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 1). In explaining and motivating the notion of capability he writes that:

[c]apability reflects a person’s freedom to choose between different ways of living. The underlying motivation – the focussing on freedom – is well captured by Marx’s claim that what we need is ‘replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances’ (Sen, 1990, p. 44).

In these works one of Sen’s central claims is that development can be seen as a ‘capability expansion’, and because capability reflects a person’s freedom, it is an expansion of freedom. And in making that claim Sen distinguishes his view from some ‘traditional’ views in economics according to which development is understood as an expansion of income or material wealth or in terms of an expansion of ‘utility’. Here again Sen cites Marx. One reason for this is that Sen argues that commodities, income and resources are not valuable in themselves. Rather they are ultimately valuable because of what people are able to do with these, the various valuable ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ which constitute valued ‘functionings’ they can achieve, and the range of lives which are constituted by these functionings from which they can choose one – which he calls ‘capability’ (see, for example, Sen, 1993b, p. 31). Marx’s concern in these later works - notably in the *Grundrisse* which was written in 1857-58 and in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* which was published in 1867 - that under capitalism people may come to value commodities independently of their uses to people (see

Marx, 1977a, p. 436 and 1990, p. 176) – so-called ‘commodity fetishism’ – focusses on much the same concern. As he puts this: ‘[i]f commodities could speak, they would say this: our use value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value....We relate to each other merely as exchange values’ (Marx, 1990, pp. 176-7). Or to take another definition of the concept, G.A. Cohen (2000, p. 199) tells us that ‘commodity fetishism is the appearance that products have value in and of themselves, apart from the labour bestowed on them’.

The central concern with human beings, which pervades Marx’s early writings is also a theme in modern work on capability, and indeed other approaches which argue for ‘people centred development’ or ‘human development’ (see Haq, 1995). And so, the following passage from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844 is also regularly cited as a precursor to the capability approach and the human development paradigm by Sen and others:

It will be seen how in the place of the wealth and poverty of political economy come the rich human being and the rich human need. The rich human being is simultaneously the human being in need of a totality of human life-activities – the man in whom his own realisation exists as an inner necessity, as need. (Sen, 1990, 43 citing Marx, 1977b; see also Marx, 1963, p. 164 and 1977a, p. 94 for alternative translations of this text).

In this and other texts I suggest that the ‘humanism’ of the early Marx is to some extent echoed in Sen’s ideas. Both are concerned that development should free human beings from the shackles that restrict them and allow them, or give them opportunity to, flourish. And these citations from Marx - in relation to the view of development as an expansion of capability - are not peripheral to Marx’s writings, since Marx himself used concepts such as

‘capacity’ in his own writings. In describing why under communism ‘individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces’ in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels tell us that:

The appropriation of these forces is itself nothing more than the development of the individual capacities corresponding to the material instruments of production. The appropriation of a totality of instruments of production is, for this reason, the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves (Marx and Engels, 1965, p. 85).

To this degree, clearly Marx and Engels’ view was a close relative of Sen’s approach and, on that view, in the move from capitalism to communism individuals will develop a ‘totality of capacities’. Indeed, it is precisely in relation to the ‘free development of individuals in communist society’ that Marx and Engels suggest that because ‘[i]n the present epoch, the domination of material conditions over individuals, and the suppression of individuality by chance, has assumed its sharpest and most universal form’ it has set them the ‘task of replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances’ (Marx, 1970, p. 117). Indeed once one reads the text which Sen cites in the context it originally appeared, it becomes very clear how and why Marx and Engels’s vision of a transition from capitalism to communism strongly echoes the view of development as an expansion of capability.

2. The Critique of Utilitarianism, Objectivity and ‘False Consciousness’.

Sen and Marx are also both critics of utilitarianism. The capability perspective is motivated not merely by a desire to avoid an inappropriate focus on commodities or resources as valuable in themselves, but also a concern with some views of welfare which are dominant in the utilitarian tradition and which have had a significant influence on the development of

welfare economics. The views of welfare that Sen has in mind are, in broad terms, views which take welfare or 'utility' to be constituted by either desire satisfaction, pleasure or happiness. Sen's argument is that if people who find themselves in straitened conditions restrict or adapt their desires to the limits of what is possible in their circumstances or learn to find pleasure or happiness in small mercies, then their welfare may not be accurately reflected by relevant 'utility'-based currencies. This is the so-called 'adaptation' or 'small mercies' argument and it is one of many levels at which Sen criticises utilitarian views, and I leave other aspects of his critique to one side in this paper.

Martha Nussbaum (1988, pp. 153-4) argued in her first discussion of capability, that there were common elements in Sen's and Aristotle's views. However, Nussbaum also claimed that Sen did not go far enough in responding to utilitarian views by merely shifting focus from the currency of 'utility' to that of 'capability'. In particular, Nussbaum claimed that Sen needed to go further and to develop a more objective view which might list the contents of a good life. Nussbaum developed her own views by articulating a list of valuable capabilities, first in the context of what she termed 'Aristotelian Social Democracy' (see Nussbaum, 1990 and 1992 *inter alia*) and then in her more recent works which develop a form of political liberalism (Nussbaum, 2000, 2006 and 2011 *inter alia*). But the crucial worry about Sen's view is well expressed in her earliest discussion where she writes:

Suppose we observe, as Sen has, that females in certain poor regions in India suffer from diseases of malnutrition in greater numbers than males do, and thus are less capable of various functionings requiring mobility and vigor... This pattern is the result of traditional distributional inequities, bolstered by culturally learnt values. Let us say that, when questioned, these women not only say that they feel good and are doing well. (This, we recall is what in fact they do say.) ... Sen takes their case to show the deficiencies of approaches to distribution that are based upon desire and satisfaction; well and good. But

it seems to me that the capability approach will exhibit similar deficiencies, unless we can specify an objective evaluation procedure that will have the power to criticise the evaluation of functionings that has been hedged around with discrimination and inequity. Sen seems on the whole to think that we remove the problem by moving from the utilitarian emphasis on desire to his own approach's emphasis on the *valuation* of capabilities. But the valuation procedure that is involved in capability selection seems to me, at least without further description, to be no more incorruptible than desire itself is. Just as people can be taught not to want or miss the things that their culture has taught them they should not or could not have, so they too can be taught not to value certain functionings as constituents of their good living, where their culture has an interest in, or cannot avoid, denying them access to these functionings (Nussbaum, 1988, pp. 175-6).

And she later adds:

It seems to me, then, that Sen needs to be more radical than he has been so far in his criticism of utilitarian accounts of well-being, by introducing an objective normative account of human functioning and by describing a procedure of objective evaluation by which functionings can be assessed through their contribution to the good human life. I think that Aristotle will provide substantial assistance in this task. (Nussbaum, 1988, p. 176).

I will not discuss in any comprehensive way the various responses Sen's work can offer to Nussbaum's objection in this text. Nor shall I dwell at length on the details of Sen's own discussion of some of the points Nussbaum raises in this discussion. I need nonetheless to connect Sen's responses to the discussion, and the claims I make, in this paper. One response Sen makes to this line of argument is that an 'objective normative account' is one 'route' one might follow in filling out the capability approach (Sen, 1993b, p. 47). He adds that he also

has an 'inclination to argue about the nature and importance of the kind of objectivity implied in this [Aristotelian] approach'. He suggests that his chief reason for not committing to an Aristotelian view of the good is that 'the deliberate incompleteness of the capability approach permits other routes to be taken' (Sen, 1993b, p. 47). In this paper, my focus is on Sen's own views of objectivity which is only one of the issues he mentions (but does not pursue) in his initial response to Nussbaum. These views were developed most fully in his paper 'Positional Objectivity' (Sen, 1993a) which was published around the time of his response to Nussbaum and indeed informs his later discussions of the reliability and robustness of evaluations of functionings in applications of the capability approach in contexts of the sort Nussbaum has in mind in this text.

In 'Positional Objectivity' Sen notes that when placed in the same position different people may come to the same belief, say about the height of a mountain or the size of the moon. To this degree, the belief may be 'objective' inasmuch as objectivity may require 'interpersonal invariance when the observation position is fixed' (Sen, 2002, p. 466). In this sense, it may be 'positionally objective'. But the belief may, nonetheless, be false because of the limitations of the position from which the observer is viewing the mountain or moon. Since such a false belief is nonetheless 'objective', Sen refers to it as an 'objective illusion'. He writes that '[t]he notion of "objective illusion," used in Marxian philosophy, can be helpfully interpreted in terms of positional objectivity' and adds that 'the concept of objective illusion figures in Marx's economic writings' as well (Sen, 2002, p. 470). The main text he cites in support of this claim is from G.A. Cohen (Sen, 2002, p. 470 and Cohen, 2000, pp. 398-9) and it relates to the 'outer form of things, which enjoys an objective status':

For Marx the senses mislead us with respect to the constitution of the air and the movements of heavenly bodies. Yet a person who managed through breathing to detect different components of the air would have a nose that did not function as healthy human

noses do. And a person who sincerely claimed to perceive a stationary sun and a rotating earth would be suffering from some disorder of vision, or motor control. Perceiving the air as elementary and the sun as in motion are experiences more akin to seeing mirages than to having hallucinations. For if a man does not see a mirage under the appropriate conditions, there is some wrong with his vision. His eyes have failed to register the play of light in the distance.

Sen notes that here ‘the observations, which are taken to be objective, relate to the positional features of breathing the air with a normal nose, seeing the sun with normal eyes, observing the play of light in the distance with normal vision, and so on’ (Sen, 2002, 471).

Sen thinks that ‘Marx’s own use of the idea’ of objective illusion ‘was primarily in the contexts of class analysis and “commodity fetishism,” and it led to his investigation of what he called “false consciousness”’ (Sen, 2002, p. 471). It is not actually clear that Marx himself used the term ‘false consciousness’ – since the origins of the actual term are usually traced to a letter Friedrich Engels wrote to Franz Mehring on 14 July 1893 (which was after Marx’s death) - and it is worth checking what Engels had in mind in this letter. Engels writes in that letter that ‘[i]deology is a process accomplished by the so-called social thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him’ (Marx, 1978, p. 766). This remark of Engels’ does, nonetheless, refer back to his own earlier co-authored writings with Marx and their discussions of ideology in particular. As they put it in *The German Ideology*: ‘[t]he class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of production are subject to it’ (Marx, 1977, 176). By implication, the ideas of Engels’ ‘social thinkers’ reflect the class structure of their time, even if they are not aware of it.

As regards Sen, the precise notion he often has in mind when he discusses ‘false consciousness’ relates to various ways in which injustices persist because of a tendency of ‘making allies out of the deprived’ (Sen, 2002, p. 474). This relates to the other element in Marx and Engels’ text: ‘the ideas of those who lack the means of production are subject to it’ and they are liable, thus, not to question the status quo. The dominance of the ruling class means – as Anthony Giddens (1971, p. 41) expresses this point – that ‘the dominant class develops or takes over ideological forms which legitimise its domination’. To the degree that they accept these forms, those who lack the means of production do not question the legitimacy of class domination.

Sen illustrates the idea of ‘objective illusion’ in a variety of ways and the examples he cites are related to those Nussbaum mentions when she urges Sen to specify a more ‘objective evaluation procedure’. One involves the perceived levels of morbidity in different parts of, or provinces in, India. One finding Sen reports is that because people in Kerala have a higher level of knowledge or consciousness of various illnesses because the level of literacy and education is higher than it is in some other parts of India, such as Uttar Pradesh, they may report a higher perceived level of morbidity than people in the latter province. The higher perceived level of morbidity in Kerala runs counter to other measures of health and, for Sen, it would be an objective illusion to conclude that people in Kerala are, on average, less healthy than they are in Uttar Pradesh (Sen, 2002, p. 472). Sen reports similar results about gender-bias in cases where women’s self-reported level of morbidity is, on average, lower than that of men in some parts of the world (Sen, 2002, p. 473). Objective illusions of this sort might, Sen thinks, be defused if people are able to take different positions and undertake, what he calls, a ‘trans-positional assessment’, which involves ‘drawing on but going beyond different positional observations’ so that ‘trans-positional scrutiny would also demand some kind of coherence between different positional views’ (Sen, 2002, p. 467). Such scrutiny

would, for example, allow one to escape the ‘illusion’ that people are (on average) healthier in Uttar Pradesh than they are in Kerala. Indeed, in his later work, he suggests that ‘[t]he positional objectivity of these parochially mistaken diagnoses commands attention, and social scientists can hardly dismiss them as subjective or capricious. But nor can self-perceptions be taken to be accurate reflections of health and illness in an appropriate transpositional understanding’ (Sen, 2009, p. 165).

What is the connection between ‘objective illusion’ as Sen understands it and ‘false consciousness’? Clearly, if people in Uttar Pradesh are on average comparatively unhealthy and have limited education, and report that they have low levels of morbidity because they have limited knowledge of medicine, data based on their reports would suggest that there is no significant disadvantage from which they suffer. That would give the appearance of ‘normality’ to their condition, when they actually suffer from significant deprivation. The same can be said about cases of adaptation of desires and where people learn to find pleasure or happiness in small mercies. If people have adapted to their situation by cutting back their desires, or finding pleasure in small mercies, with a view to coping with their living conditions, a desire, pleasure or happiness calculus might also significantly underestimate their disadvantage. While each of these various cases is distinct, in each, the deprived would provide information or express views which would obscure and significantly understate their own suffering or deprivation. They would thus become complicit in the perpetuation and legitimization of an unjust status quo.

While Sen makes the notion of ‘making allies of’ the poor or deprived central in his discussions of ‘false consciousness’ and objective illusion, Marx and Engels’s own discussion of utilitarianism criticises it in a different way which implicitly also invokes ‘false consciousness’. As we have seen, Marx and Engels thought that production of ideas reflects the material conditions of life. This line of thinking underlies their criticism of utilitarianism.

They suggest in *The German Ideology* that '[t]he advances made by the theory of utility and exploitation, in various phases, are closely connected with the various periods of development of the bourgeoisie' (Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 111). They go on in assessing the criticisms of existing social and economic arrangements which 'Bentham and his school' advanced and suggest that: '[t]hereby the whole criticism of the existing world provided by utilitarianism moved within a narrow compass. Prejudiced in favour of the conditions of the bourgeoisie, it could criticise only those relations which had been handed down from a past epoch and were an obstacle to the development of the bourgeoisie' (Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 113).

If utilitarians suffer from objective illusion or 'false consciousness' here this must derive from their position in society. This criticism of utilitarianism is quite different to the one which Sen advances in articulating the capability approach since it is primarily concerned with the production of ideas rather than the ways in which the disadvantaged themselves obscure the injustices of the status quo. Marx and Engels' view that ideology masks the material conditions of life is also famously developed by Georg Lukács in his discussion of 'false consciousness' in the context of the 'problem of crises' (in capitalism). Lukács argues that even if 'a scientifically acceptable solution [to the problem of crises] does exist' that does not help since 'to accept it would be tantamount to observing society *from a standpoint other than that of the bourgeoisie*' (Lukács, 1995, p. 229). This discussion of 'false consciousness' seems to invoke what Sen calls 'objective illusion': there may be truths that bourgeois thinkers have no access to simply because of their 'position' within society as members of the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels are making a similar point about 'Bentham and his school'. For this reason, they suggest that utilitarians can provide no more than 'a mere apologia for the existing state of affairs' (see Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 114). This way of invoking 'false consciousness' in criticising utilitarianism – which involves bourgeois

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2
3 thinkers providing an apologia for capitalism - is quite different from the line that Sen takes,
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5 which focusses on the various ways in which the deprived can adapt to their living
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7 conditions, or perceive them in such a way as to obscure the nature of inequalities or
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9 deprivation in society.¹
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11 12 13 **3. Objectivity, Public Discussion and Informed Desire.** 14

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16 Given Sen's account of 'objective illusion' one might naturally ask: how might one defuse
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18 'objective illusions' in moral and political thought? And how might one make more reliable
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20 judgements in assessing people's desires, valuations and reasons when people may adapt to
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22 their situations? One theme that runs through Sen's work is that public reasoning which
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24 involves discussion and interaction with others, including distant others, can broaden one's
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26 perspective and so may avoid objective illusion through trans-positional scrutiny. For this
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28 sort of reason Sen also associates objectivity in ethics with the ability to stand up to, and
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30 survive scrutiny through, public reasoning (see Sen, 2009, p. 122), and this is a view of
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32 objectivity he more generally attributes to John Rawls (see Sen, 2009, p. 42). Indeed, when
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34 he is faced with those who follow Nussbaum's critique in suggesting that his version of the
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36 capability view does not go far enough in advancing an objective view of the good, his
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38 implicit response in later statements of the capability approach (see, for example, Sen, 2009,
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40 p. 231) is to argue that the functionings which are relevant in applying the capability
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42 approach are ones one not merely values but also has reason to value. Potential divergences
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44 between what one values and has reason to value can emerge if one is ill-informed or if one's
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46 perspective has been narrowed by the parochial or limited conditions in which one finds
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48 oneself (see, for example, Sen, 2006b, p. 237 and Qizilbash, 2007, p. 183). And in both cases
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50 engagement in public reasoning, not merely with others in one's own nation, but also
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52 potentially including the views of distant others, can narrow the gap between what one values
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54 and has reason to value. As Sen notes when discussing evaluative reflection:
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This is an exercise in which we are constantly engaged. To that general understanding has to be added the possible importance of public reasoning as a way of extending the reach and reliability of valuations and of making them more robust. The necessity of scrutiny and critical assessment is not just a demand of self-centred evaluation by secluded individuals, but a pointer to the fruitfulness of public discussion and of interactive public reasoning: social evaluations may be starved of useful information and good arguments if they are based on separated and sequestered cogitation. Public discussion and deliberation can lead to a better understanding of the role, reach and significance of particular functionings and their combinations (Sen, 2009, pp. 241-2).

To illustrate this general line of argument, Sen returns to the case of gender inequality in India and the 'importance of certain freedoms that did not receive adequate acknowledgement earlier' (Sen, 2009, p. 242).

If one takes these to be the central ingredients of one potential line of response to Nussbaum's objection because it involves a more 'objective evaluation procedure' informed by Sen's reading of Marx, I suggest that this response is in some respects prefigured in J.S. Mill's discussion in *Utilitarianism*, notably his discussion of 'competent judges'. Suppose that we ask whether one pleasure is better than another. Mill argued that to answer this sort of question we might consult the beliefs of people who have experience of both. Mill's own discussion centres on pleasures of different qualities. He argued that '[o]f two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference ... that is the more desirable pleasure' (Mill, 1962, pp. 259-260). Various examples which are used to illustrate this point – involving, for example, a comparison of the pleasures of Socrates and the fool – might appear rather elitist to some modern readers. But Mill's general thought is, in one respect, very similar to Sen's. Mill clearly doubts the reliability of people's judgements and valuations when their experience or position is in some way

restricted. Because she has experience or knowledge of both pleasures and can see the world from the position of people enjoying each, the perspective of the competent judge presumably would involve trans-positional scrutiny and is informed in a way that someone who has only experience or knowledge of one pleasure (or kind of pleasure) is not. To this degree, the perspective of the competent judge is also 'non-parochial' in a way that the perspectives of others – who are only familiar with one pleasure - might not be. Viewed in this light, Mill's competent judges might indeed be seen as engaged in trans-positional scrutiny. And this way of establishing whether or not the judge's view is 'competent' is also a forerunner of modern versions of the desire account, which understand well-being in terms of rational or informed desire (see Brandt, 1992, Griffin, 1986 and Railton, 1986 *inter alia* as well as Sidgwick, 1981) or which understand value in terms of higher-order desires (see Lewis, 1989). In particular the difference, in Sen's work, between what one values and has reason to value is closely related to the gap between actual desire and informed or rational desire in the literature on desire views (see, for example, Griffin, 1986, pp. 8-38). For this reason, I suggest that this aspect of Sen's later development of the capability approach might be regarded as a not too distant relative of the informed desire view (on this see also Qizilbash, 2013, p. 38). Of course, the relationship between Sen's writings on capability and various versions of the informed desire view would need further discussion in exploring the links between desire and value on Sen's view and it is beyond the scope of this paper to address that question (see Sen, 1985, pp. 188-192). Nonetheless, it is important here that unlike Nussbaum (2000, pp. 145-161) who is only willing to give informed desire an ancillary role in her version of the capability view, Sen (1992, p. 54) does not completely exclude the possibility that his view is compatible with some version of the desire account. As he puts it: '[t]here is indeed no reason why such desire-based accounting of capabilities and functionings could not count as a specific version of the capability approach broadly defined'

(Sen, 1992, p. 54). However, here he qualifies his remarks by mentioning potential ‘problems relating to motivational contrasts’ and goes on to cite the problem of small mercies and adaptation of desires (Sen, 1992, p. 55) which also leads Nussbaum in the end not to give desire a central role in her view. However, if the informed desire view might address the concerns Sen raises relating to adaptation and small mercies in the same way that his own view deals with the gap between what one values and has reason to value, one might plausibly claim that his view is a variant, or close relative, of the informed desire view which adds a requirement of trans-positional scrutiny involving public discussion onto the standard requirements for a desire to count as ‘informed’ or ‘rational’.

Sen’s suggestion that our judgements can be rendered more robust and informed through public discussion is also prefigured in J.S. Mill. In *On Liberty* Mill (1962, p. 145) mounts a very eloquent defence of the liberty of thought and discussion. In defending this liberty he asks the following question: ‘[w]hy is it, then, that there is on the whole a preponderance among mankind of rational opinions and rational conduct?’ And he answers:

If there really is this preponderance – which there must be unless human affairs are, and have always been, in an almost desperate state – it is owing to a quality of the human mind, the source of everything respectable in man either as an intellectual or as a moral being, namely that his errors are corrigible. He is capable of rectifying his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion to show how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument; but facts and arguments, to have any effect on the mind, must be brought before it. (Mill, 1962, pp. 145-6)

If one takes this argument seriously one would be inclined to add to the relevant experience requirement which Mill imposed on the ‘competence’ of judges (who are comparing

pleasures) that their views have also been subjected to scrutiny through, and been corrected through, discussion with others. And if one does that, the view that Mill espoused would also be related to Sen's, even if Sen's work on objectivity invokes Marx and even if Sen is critical of utilitarianism while Mill is one of its leading advocates (on this see also Sen, 2006a and Qizilbash, 2006 and 2008).

I must add a note of caution here. Even if one can use the notion of trans-positional scrutiny in reading Mill's discussion of higher and lower order pleasures, it is not obvious that the centrality of experience which is crucial in Mill's view can be found in Sen's since there are many ways in which one might be informed (e.g. through certain forms of education) which may not actually require experience of various functionings. Furthermore, while there is some similarity between Sen's views and the informed desire account, there are different versions of that account and his view is not explicitly developed as a version of that account. There is, nonetheless, at least one lead about what Sen might think about an informed desire view which contains an experience requirement of the sort that Mill has in mind in his discussion of 'competent judges'. Jon Elster considers a version of the 'informed preference' account according to which: 'one should attach more weight to the preferences of someone who knows both sides of the question than to someone who has at most experienced one of the alternatives. These informed preferences are ... informed in the sense of being grounded in experience, not in the sense of being grounded in the meta-preferences of the individual' (Elster, 1983, p. 113). As it happens, in motivating this notion of informed preference, Elster (1983, 112-3) cites an early text of Sen's where Sen discusses the evaluation of welfare when preferences can change as a result of experience. He writes:

Preferences about one's way of life and location are typically the result of one's past experience and an initial reluctance to move does not imply a perpetual dislike. The distinction has some bearing on welfare aspects of employment policy, since the

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3 importance that one wishes to attach to the wage gap as a reflection of the labourer's
4 preferences would tend to depend on the extent to which tastes are expected to vary as a
5 consequence of the movement itself. (Sen, 1975, p. 54)
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10 In discussing this passage, Elster suggests that a natural reading of it is that the preferences
11 one might have about the comparison of city and country life after moving to the city – which
12 he calls an '*ex post* evaluation' – might justify a migration policy even if someone judges
13 prior to the move – in their '*ex ante* evaluation' – that she prefers country life. Sen's original
14 riposte is that this is not a natural reading of his text. He suggests rather that: '[o]ne's
15 judgement can depend *both* on the *ex ante* and *ex post* preferences of the migrant, and I
16 should argue that it *should*' (Sen, 1980-1, p.107). Nonetheless, while accepting Sen's
17 response about how this passage should be read, Elster does not entirely relent from his initial
18 point and argues that even in the light of Sen's response: 'there must be cases in which *ex*
19 *ante* preferences can be overridden. If there is a trade-off between *ex ante* and *ex post*
20 preferences, this must mean that *ex ante* preferences can *sometimes* be overridden.' (Elster,
21 1983, 113). Or to put the point differently, informed preferences may sometimes override
22 actual preferences in the evaluation of welfare. It is clear from this complex exchange that
23 Sen may not – at that time – have accepted a simplistic experience based view of informed
24 preferences as the standard of welfare. Nonetheless, in evaluating Sen's later views it is not
25 clear what weight one should give to this exchange with Elster which is played out in
26 relatively obscure notes to various texts and predates his discussion of positional objectivity
27 and public reasoning.
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51 **4. Conclusions.**

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54 I have argued that through various citations from Karl Marx's works in Amartya Sen's
55 expositions of the capability approach Sen claims a pedigree for some of his ideas in Marx's
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work. Indeed, there are undeniably some significant affinities between various texts that Marx wrote or co-authored with Friedrich Engels and Sen's view of development as an expansion of capability. Marx and Engels clearly thought – at least in *The German Ideology* - that in the transformation from capitalism to communism there would be a 'development' of a 'totality of capacities' as people took over the productive forces in society. Furthermore, a significant connection between Marx and Engels' and Sen's works that I have discussed relates to the notion of 'false consciousness' and their respective critiques of utilitarianism. Sen's works on positional objectivity, objective illusion and public reasoning suggest that public reasoning can help to dispel objective illusions through trans-positional scrutiny and can help bridge the gap between what a person values and has reason to value. To this degree, engagement in public reasoning can make evaluations of functionings (including the weight to be given to different functionings) more objective and robust. This is one way in which Sen might respond to those, like Martha Nussbaum, who have argued that he needs to provide a more objective evaluation procedure for the selection of functionings. But while Sen's view of objectivity is developed in relation to the notion of objective illusion for which he claims a pedigree in Marx's views, I have argued that it also echoes John Stuart Mill's discussion of 'competent judges' as well as Mill's remarks about the importance of free discussion in correcting false opinions.

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¹ As we have seen, Sen also connects the concepts of objective illusion and ‘false consciousness’ to Marx’s discussion of ‘commodity fetishism’. On this see Marx’s discussion of ‘commodity fetishism’ and the ‘political economist’s bourgeois consciousness’ in *Capital: Volume 1* (Marx, 1990, pp. 174-6). For a reading of Marx which helpfully elucidates the connection see also Cohen (2000, pp. 125-129).